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THE DESIGN OF OBJECTIVE DIAGNOSTIC AND ATTAINMENT TESTS OF A READING-WRITING COMMAND OF FRENCH.

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READING AND WRITING SKILLS CAN BE TESTED OBJECTIVELY WITHOUT USING TRADITIONAL TRANSLATION TESTS. WHEN READING FRENCH, STUDENTS NEED TO RECOGNIZE WORDS IN BOTH UNINFLECTED AND INFLECTED FORMS TO ATTACH MEANING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT, AND TO REACT TO THE MEANING IMPLICATIONS OF FRENCH SENTENCE STRUCTURE. WHEN WRITING FRENCH, THEY NEED TO PRODUCE APPROPRIATE WORDS IN BOTH UNINFLECTED AND INFLECTED FORMS AND TO USE FRENCH SENTENCE STRUCTURE APPROPRIATELY. OBJECTIVE TESTS DESIGNED TO MEASURE THESE SKILLS CAN BE USED EITHER AS DIAGNOSTIC TESTS TO POINT UP DEFICIENCIES REQUIRING FURTHER TEACHING, OR AS ATTAINMENT TESTS TO ASSESS THE STANDARD ACHIEVED AT CERTAIN MAIN POINTS OF THE COURSE. THESE TESTS REQUIRE CAREFUL CONSTRUCTION, BUT CAN BE SCORED EASILY AND OBJECTIVELY. SEVERAL EXAMPLES, SUGGESTIONS FOR SCORING, AND HINTS FOR CONSTRUCTION ARE GIVEN FOR OBJECTIVE GROUP TESTS OF WORD RECOGNITION, READING COMPREHENSION, WRITTEN COMMAND, AND WRITTEN SELF-EXPRESSION. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "BABEL," VOLUME 1, NUMBER 3, OCTOBER 1965. (AM)

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The Design of Objective Diagnostic and Attainment Tests of a Reading-Writing Command of French

NEILE OSMAN*

WHETHER French is being taught by an aural-oral approach or not, it is possible to test a reading-writing command of French objectively without the necessity of having recourse to translation as the means of testing.

In my article on the objective testing of an aural-oral command of French (*Babel*, No. 1, Vol. 2, 1965), I suggested that an aural-oral approach was not incompatible with immediate consolidation of all aural-oral work through reading and writing. Indeed, an enlightened view of reading and writing in a foreign language sees these two skills as an extension of the aural-oral skills — reading as an extension of the aural skill, and writing as an extension of the oral skill. Few people reading in a foreign language ever reach the stage where they can read the foreign language without silently vocalising what they are reading. More people would be able to write readily in a foreign language if they would engage in self-dictation — merely thinking what they would *say* if they were speaking to a person face to face, and then writing from their own silent dictation of what they would say. This approach to ready writing is not without its application in the native language.

Traditionally, examinations of reading and writing in French have been modelled on examinations in Latin, and have tended to consist of passages for translation from and into French, possibly a reading comprehension section with questions to be answered in French (or in English), with a limited number of sentences to be translated or commented on. There have also been questions on "French culture", to be answered usually in English. There may also have been an essay to be written in French.

The choice of passages for translation has tended to be subjective, with a tendency to see how pupils get on before the basis of marking is decided. On the other hand, the limited number of sentences for translation or comment has usually shown evidence of having been carefully selected to test what the examiners have considered to be difficult points which pupils should have mastered after the number of years of study of French represented by the particular examination.

The marking of translation passages has tended to be a very subjective affair. It would appear that performance of pupils in an examination has often influenced the number of points to be taken off for each mistake. In other words, the marking system seems to have been used to make right what may sometimes have been an unfortunate choice of translation passage.

The "luck of the draw" seems to have been an important consideration as far as pupils taking traditional-style examinations have been concerned. Particularly from the point of view of vocabulary, there is a certain element of chance as to whether a pupil will know a particular set of vocabulary items involved in a translation passage. If he knows them, he is well off. If he does not know this particular set of vocabulary items, he is unlikely to pass in that passage, because a knowledge of these items is central to the adequate translation of the passage. Incidentally, the offending set of vocabulary items may be quite rare and specialised, so that there is every chance that pupils will not have met them before the examination.

With subjectively chosen translation passages, subjective marking systems tend to be guided by a desire to have a certain number of candidates pass and a certain number fail (whether

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those "passed" really deserve to pass or not, and whether those "failed" really deserve to fail or not) and to have a pass mark as close to 50% as possible. In terms of sheer marks, it should be remembered that a pass with 51% implies a 49% ignorance of the subject. On the other hand, we could be pardoned for feeling that such a candidate was lucky to have found something in the examination on which he *could* get 51%. Or conversely we might feel that this candidate was unlucky that he did not encounter something in the examination on which he could get 80%. Since the choice of items in traditional-style examinations has been largely subjective, and since marking schemes have also tended to be subjective, it has been very difficult for teachers to predict how a particular pupil would perform at examination. Everything would depend on the actual items of the examination!

In traditional-style examinations in French, the very good pupils have been reasonably safe for a pass, of higher or lower standard. The very bad pupils might even pass, depending on the actual items in the examination, or they might fail abysmally. The middling pupils would be lucky if they passed, and unlucky if they failed.

It would be interesting to work out how a traditional-style examination measured up to the problem of involving all the points of French sentence structure set out in the syllabus for that examination. It is, of course, most likely that certain points would be tested over and over again, while others would not be tested at all. Similarly, it is most likely that vocabulary tested would not be truly representative of the "core" of vocabulary considered appropriate for the level concerned, but would tend to favour a comparatively few restricted sets of vocabulary items, since these would appear useful "for examination purposes".

Translation from French to English is, of course, *the fifth language skill,* while translation from English to French is *the sixth language skill.* They are not necessary as the means of *teaching* French, nor are they necessary as the means of *testing* a reading-writing command of French. If they are to be taught and tested, they should be taught and tested as the separate skills that they are — skills over and above the aural-oral pair of skills and the reading-writing pair, and very specialised skills at that!

How can a reading-writing command of French be tested objectively?

We can say that the following ingredients are involved in a reading-writing command of French:

- the ability to recognise and to produce the uninflected forms of known French words;
- the ability to recognise the inflected forms of known French words, including the ability to recognise the structural implications of the inflected forms;
- the ability to produce the inflected forms of known French words, including the ability to use the inflected forms in accordance with the requirements of sentence meaning and French sentence structure;
- the ability to spell accurately both the uninflected and the inflected forms of known French words;
- the ability to attach meaning to French words read in context;
- the ability to choose French words appropriate to context when writing French;
- the ability to react to French sentence structure as the device giving overall meaning to French sentences when they are read;
- the ability to use French sentence structure appropriately when writing French.

For testing purposes, a reading-writing command of French can be broken up into a number of areas, all of which can be tested objectively through *group* tests.

This article presents a number of types of test appropriate to the testing of a reading-writing command of French. All the types of test may be used for *diagnostic* purposes or for purposes of *attainment* testing. *Diagnostic tests* assess the effectiveness of learning and teaching at intervals throughout the course, and should be used as the basis for remedial teaching. *Attainment tests* assess the standard of the command of French achieved at certain main points of the course, possibly with the desire of passing or failing pupils.

The two basic assumptions stated in the previous article on aural-oral testing need to be restated here:

(a) The measure of how well a pupil has learnt French is the extent to which he has mastered those difficulties which exist in French for pupils who speak English as their mother-tongue.

(b) It is largely a waste of testing time to test items which are known to cause no difficulty to English-speaking pupils.

Objective tests consisting of a large number of small items can be very searching in assessing pupils' reading-writing command of French. They are easy for teachers to score. If cyclostyled sheets are used, a scoring mask can be prepared for each sheet, with the correct answers indicated.

For examination purposes, a group of objective tests would provide a large number of test items covering a number of areas. A pupil would be either right or wrong on each small item, and value judgments would tend not to be required from the person administering the test and scoring it.

1.—Objective tests of reading word-recognition

If English meanings of French words are known (and this is in no way inconsistent with an approach which avoids translation as a teaching technique), pupils' recognition of French words can be tested objectively. For each test word that pupils read, three possible English equivalents are given. Only one of these is a true equivalent of the test word. The others are equivalents of other French words which are similar in appearance to the test word. Here is an example:

gronder
(to) grow up ..... ( )
(to) scold ..... ( )
(to) grunt ..... ( )
Don't know ..... ( )

The unseen distractors, of course, are *grandir* and *grogner*. Pupils have to put a tick alongside the "meaning" which they consider is equivalent to the French test word.

The construction of individual items is based on trios of words which are confusable visually, but which are all within the vocabulary range of the pupil. The position of the correct answer should be allocated at random to preclude any possibility of the position of correct answers being predictable.

Obviously, the test sets out to test pupils' ability to recognise French words in their uninflected form (or dictionary "citation" form) and to associate English meanings with the French words they read.

2.—Objective tests of reading comprehension

Tests of reading comprehension can be given at various levels of complexity. The test of reading comprehension may provide a number of isolated sentences, with a set of multiple-choice possibilities for each sentence. Each multiple-choice item consists of a number of statements in relation to the test sentence. Only one of the statements is correct; the others are misleading distractors. The statements in the multiple-choice items may be in either French or English, depending on the requirements of the syllabus for the examination. If they are in French, the French in which the statements are couched should be within the prescribed range of French of candidates. The position of the correct statements should be allocated at random.

The second level of complexity for reading comprehension testing provides for pupils to read two or three connected sentences before they mark their choice in the multiple-choice item which applies to that group of sentences. A number of such test items can be provided in the one test.

The third, and most complex, level of reading comprehension testing provides for pupils to read one longer passage before answering a number of multiple-choice sets relating to the content of the passage.

In tests of reading comprehension, it is particularly important that direct quotations from the text of the passage, group of sentences, or single sentence should not be used as the correct statement in multiple-choice items. Rather, correct statements should draw on the facts without reproducing the actual wording. It is also important that pupils should need to understand the text before being able to answer the multiple-choice items correctly. There have been reading comprehension tests in which a high score could be obtained on the basis of general knowledge, without the need for reading and understanding the test passage!

3.—Objective tests of written French

There are five basic types of objective test of written French which do not involve translation. These are: *completion, completion supplying correct forms, completion involving*

correct placement of correct forms, mutation and *generation*. These are treated in turn, with an indication of the possibilities of each type.

For *diagnostic* purposes, the points involved in a test are restricted to what has just been learnt. For *attainment* purposes, points drawn from the entire course can be grouped for testing.

Some experts in the construction of tests of the sentence structure of a foreign language advocate the use of test items in which three, four or five possible ways of writing a sentence are given as a multiple-choice item, the pupil being required to tick the one that he considers correct. I do not favour this type of test item in a test of sentence structure, since all that it does is to invite the pupil to recognise what is correct and to reject what is incorrect. It does not require him to *supply what is correct* by drawing on his own knowledge of sentence structure. Therefore all the types of sentence structure test that I describe in this article are of the type that require the pupil to supply correct French.

3A.—*Tests of written French involving completion*

The implication in a completion-type test is that the pupil has to supply what is missing in an otherwise complete French sentence. It is often possible to group a number of points into one test, as in the following example:

Use *mon, ma, ton, ta, son, sa, votre, notre, leur, vos, nos, mes, tes, ses* or *leurs*.
Example:
notre
Nous sommes ici; voici ..... auto.
1. Il est là; voilà ..... bicyclette.
2. Ils sont ici; voici ..... enfants.
3. Tu es là; voilà ..... cahiers.
4. Elle est là; voilà ..... amie.
5. Je suis ici; voici ..... parapluie.

and so on.

It is better if the number of test items does not quite equal the number of possibilities set out at the head of each group of items. A group of test items such as this will thoroughly test one area of French sentence structure.

Another important area of French sentence structure could be tested through the following group of items:

Use *du, de la, de l', des, de* or *d'*.
Example:
de la
J'ai ..... viande.
1. Il a ..... œufs.
2. Je veux ..... fromage.
3. Je n'ai pas ..... argent.
4. Voulez-vous ..... poivre?
5. Donnez-moi ..... confiture!
6. Avez-vous ..... encre?
7. Tu as ..... jolis yeux. (If this point is to be treated.)
8. Je ne veux pas ..... beurre.

and so on.

Note how, in this group of test items, a different device has been used to avoid the possibility of pupils' trying to account for *all* of the possible forms given at the head of the group. In this instance, there are *more* test items than there are possible forms at the head of the group.

In completion-type tests, what *is* given for each item must be sufficient, considered along with the preliminary instruction and the example, to supply the specific context which will make only one possible insertion the correct one for the space provided in that item. Note that the size of the space is uniform in length to avoid giving any help to pupils in their choice of the correct "slot-filler"! Note also the ease with which a scoring mask could be prepared, since the location of answers on the sheet is fixed by the design of the sheet.

3B.—*Test of written French involving completion by supplying correct forms of given words*

An example of a test of ability to write a nominated verb-form for a chosen group of verbs might be:

Write the same form of all these verbs:
Example:
boirai
(Buvez!) Je ..... ce verre de lait.
1. (Ecrivez!) Elle ..... cette lettre.
2. (Lisez!) Ils ..... le journal.
3. (Prenez!) Il ..... la bicyclette.
4. (Courez!) Tu ..... à la banque.
5. (Arrêtez-vous!) Nous ..... bientôt.
6. (Venez!) Je ..... dans cinq minutes.

and so on.

Note that this type of test can be made as easy or as difficult as the teacher or examiner chooses, to suit the level of attainment of pupils. The test immediately above could be made to suit any tense-form by merely including the desired tense-form in the space in the example. Thus if *bois* had been included, all answers would have to be in the Present. With slight modifications, the answers could be required in the Passé Composé if *ai bu* had been included in the example.

Another example of this type of test could require pupils to supply the correct tense-form of given verbs to suit the context as revealed in that part of the sentence which is given:

Write the correct tense-form of the verb:
Example:

vais

(aller) Je ..... à l'école tous les jours.

1. (écrire) J' ..... cet exercice en ce moment.
2. (lire) A cette heure hier il ..... un magazine.
3. (ouvrir) Il ..... la porte il y a deux heures.
4. (se reposer) Elle ..... depuis vingt minutes.
5. (prendre) Ils ..... le petit déjeuner à sept heures demain matin.

The same type of test can be applied to any point of French sentence structure which involves the choice of correct forms, e.g. with agreement of adjectives:

Write the correct form of the word in brackets:
Example:

grise

(gris) Cette voiture est .....

1. (paresseux) Cet homme est .....
2. (long) Ce crayon est .....
3. (plein) Cette bouteille est .....
4. (paresseux) Ces fillettes sont .....
5. (blanc) Cette enveloppes est .....
6. (long) Cette règle est .....
7. (gris) Ces livres sont .....
8. (plein) Ces paquets sont .....

and so on.

3C.—*Test of written French involving completion by placing the correct form of a given word in the correct position in the sentence*

This type of test is particularly applicable to adjectives used attributively (i.e. in close association with the noun as part of the noun group). The following is a difficult example:

Rewrite these sentences, including the correct form of the word in brackets and placing it in the correct position in the sentence:
Examples:

(gris) Regardez cette voiture!
Regardez cette voiture grise!

.....

(vieux) Regardez cet homme!
Regardez ce vieil homme!

.....

1. (long) Voilà un autobus!

.....

2. (beau) Quelles peintures!

.....

3. (court) Prenez ces bâtons!

.....

4. (nouveau) Regardez les avions!

.....

and so on.

This type of test can be made easy or difficult according to the level of attainment of pupils. Note how pupils are required to make adjustments such as that required in the second of the two examples given at the head of the test.

3D.—*Test of written French involving mutation*

In this type of test, pupils are required to make the same nominated change in all sentences given in the test. The following is a simple example:

Rewrite each sentence using *ne* ..... *pas.*
Example:

Je suis heureux.
Je ne suis pas heureux.

.....

1. Il est grand.

.....

2. Vous êtes paresseux.

.....

and so on.

A much more difficult example of a test involving mutation would be:

Rewrite each sentence in the way shown in the example:
Example:

Ils se souviennent de cela.
Ne se sont-ils pas souvenus de cela?

.....

1. Elle arrive en ce moment.

.....

2. Vous marchez trop vite, Hélène.

.....

3. Ils s'amusent bien.

.....

4. Il court assez lentement.

.....

5. Vous vous mettez à pleurer, Marie.

.....

6. Elles tombent dans un trou profond.

.....

and so on.

Note how any consequential changes involved by the central point in a mutation test may fairly be expected from pupils, provided that the other points concerned are also within their syllabus by the stage at which they are being tested. Thus in a mutation test involving a change from affirmative to negative, the sentence: *J'ai de l'essence* should be rendered *Je n'ai pas d'essence*. Similarly, in the second mutation test given as an example immediately above, pupils should be expected to make consequential changes where necessary in the past participles concerned. In the design of this particular type of mutation test, note how provision can be made for there to be only one correct answer in cases where there might be doubt on which form of agreement is required, for example, in sentence 5.

3E.—*Test of written French involving generation of sentences*

This type of written test is quite distinct from the mutation type, in which a complete sentence is given as the basis for writing a new sentence by making the necessary changes.

In the generation type of written test, pupils are required to generate a complete sentence each time on the basis of whatever "prompts" are given. Here is a simple form of generation test in which pupils have to write sentences involving *il y a*, the partitive article, the most likely preposition to suit the information given, and the necessary form of the definite article:

Write sentences of the type shown in the example:
Example:
..... huile ..... bouteille
Il y a de l'huile dans la bouteille.

1. ..... fromage ..... assiette
2. ..... oiseaux ..... cage
3. ..... confiture ..... boîte
4. ..... herbe ..... arbres
5. ..... lait ..... réfrigérateur
6. ..... chevaux ..... ferme

and so on.

Another type of generation test is one in which pupils have to write appropriate answers on the basis of the information given, for example:

Answer these questions:
Example:
Est-ce Marie? — Non, ——.
Non, ce n'est pas Marie.

1. Etes-vous Jacques Duval? — Non, ...
2. Est-ce Yvonne? — Oui, ——.
3. Est-il heureux? — Oui, ——.
4. Sont-ils paresseux? — Non, ——.
5. Est-ce M. Monet? — Oui, ——.
6. Etes-vous malades? — Non, ——.

and so on.

This general type of written test can be applied to any tense form of the verb, or to any combination of test forms.

With the other type of question (that which begins with an interrogative word or phrase), a generation test is easy to set if sufficient information is given to indicate the answer required, for example:

Example:
Où avez-vous mis votre valise?
—— ——— plancher.
J'ai mis ma valise sur le plancher.

1. Où a-t-elle mené son petit frère?
— ——— maison.
2. Quand ont-ils vu leur cousine?
— ——— hier.
3. Pourquoi avez-vous ôté votre pull-over?
— ——— j'ai chaud.
4. Où a-t-elle acheté ces gâteaux?
— ——— boulanger.

and so on.

Note how the whole character of the test would have been changed if the model answer to the "Example" had read: *Je l'ai mise sur le plancher.*

Quite difficult tests can be devised to require questions to be generated to accord with the given answers, for example:

Write the appropriate questions:
Example:
Où avez-vous mis la bouteille?
— J'ai mis la bouteille sur la table.

1. .....
— Je me suis levé à six heures.
2. .....
— Elle a mangé les biscuits parce qu'elle avait faim.
3. .....
— J'apprends le français depuis trois ans.
4. .....
— Elles ont pris ces stylos dans le tiroir.

and so on.

Still another type of generation test is found when the "prompt" is a complete sentence, on the basis of which pupils have to write another sentence of a different type altogether, for example:

Write a new sentence each time using *voici*:
Example:
J'ai un chien.
Voici mon chien.

1. Vous avez une auto.
2. Ils ont une maison.
3. Elle a un cheval.
4. J'ai une enveloppe.
5. Il a une bicyclette.

and so on.

This can be a very versatile type of generation test, since the complexity of language in both the "prompt" sentences and those which pupils must generate can be matched to the level of attainment of the pupils.

4.—Objective tests of written self-expression in French

There are three main types of tests of written self-expression in French which can be scored

objectively, and which do not involve translation. These are: *answers to a questionnaire, guided self-expression,* and *an essay*. Of the three types, the hardest to score objectively is the essay.

4A.—*Objectively scored written answers to a questionnaire*

A questionnaire to be answered in writing can be set in such a way that both questions and answers will be within pupils' range of French. A set of ten questions can yield a total score of 30 points for the answers if each answer is scored on the following basis:

3 points if the answer is absolutely appropriate and grammatically correct;

2 points if one or two grammatical errors have been made;

1 point if three or four grammatical errors have been made;

0 points if the pupil obviously did not understand the question, or if he had more than four errors.

4B.—*Objectively scored guided written self-expression test*

A series of pictures which between them make up a story could well be the stimulus for a number of connected sentences written by the pupil. The tense-form to be used by the pupil can be indicated very easily by means of one introductory statement or question.

Ten numbered pictures could lead to a minimum of ten sentences to be written by the pupil, and each sentence could be scored on the same basis as was suggested in 4B above for the written answers to a questionnaire, i.e., a possible score of 3 points per sentence.

4C.—*Objectively scored essays*

This type of written test should be given only in the later stages of a secondary course in French, being deferred until pupils have mastered a sufficient range of French sentence structure and vocabulary to be able to express themselves freely in written French.

Various approaches to objective scoring of essays are favoured, but the basic fact is hard to dispute, that objective scoring becomes easier as soon as the total points for the essay can be divided between a number of aspects. One workable approach would be to divide a total of 50 points for an essay of 300 words into three aspects — language (30 points), form (10 points) and development of thoughts (10 points).

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General comments on objective tests of a reading-writing command of French

No comments or suggestions are made in this article on the subject of translation-type tests as objective tests, since teachers are already thoroughly familiar with this type of test.

With the types of objective test mentioned and described in this article, it is entirely possible that pupils who know their work well will manage quite high overall scores no matter what combination of tests of reading and tests of written French is chosen. On the other hand, pupils who score well must really know their work well, and the same tests on which they score well may prove very difficult for pupils whose reading and writing ability in French is not sound.

If an aural-oral approach is being followed, the present article and that in the previous issue will give sufficient variety of types of tests of the various aspects of a knowledge of French to ensure that a properly balanced total test of both the aural-oral aspects and the reading-writing aspects can be constructed.